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ABSTRACT

The Colorado Strategic Options Initiative promotes the restructuring and redesign of education to enable all schools and communities to meet all students' and citizens' needs in the future. The concept of restructuring education may be seen as part of an evolutionary process from the 20th century industrial, assembly-line model to the eventual emergence of learning communities. The second section of this publication outlines several interrelated strategic components essential to restructured schooling, including school-centered decision making and accountability, personal sense of belonging, flexible use of time and space, integrated core curriculum, and changed roles for students and teachers. Section 3 enumerates shared beliefs about restructuring. Section 4 presents a vision for the 21st century, specifying context; beliefs and assumptions; learning principles; learner goals; instruction and learning modalities; curriculum and program; structure, organization, and facilities; and evaluation and accountability. Section 5 provides background information for the initiative, characterizing it as a grass roots, self-help effort and supplying a chronology of committee actions. The publication lists members of the Strategic Options Steering Committee and provides a bibliography of 15 references. (MLH)

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VISION AND BELIEFS: STRATEGIC OPTIONS INITIATIVE

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A series of papers laying out the history, essential components, beliefs and educational vision of the Colorado strategic options initiative for restructuring schools and education.

Strategic Options Steering Committee
Denver, Colorado
April, 1990

Conference Edition

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Stages of School Evolution 1

II. Essential Components 2

III. Shared Beliefs 5

IV. Vision 6

V. Background on the Colorado Strategic Options Initiative 12

Brief Bibliography

Steering Committee

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These statements were developed by a team from the Strategic Options Steering Committee and others using, as a starting base, a variety of papers and analyses of works presented in our 1989 strategic options guidebook Restructuring Education: Strategic Options Required for Excellence (Jim Hennes, Jane Larsh, Ed Larsh, Eugene Howard, Jerry Villars & Arnold Langberg, available for $8.00 prepaid from Strategic Options at the address below). The statements were developed at a series of work sessions led initially by Gene Howard and Ed Larsh, using in part the material developed for the Classroom 2001 project in Westminster School District, Colorado.

The papers included herein lay out a set of beliefs and a vision for education. The papers in the guidebook, Restructuring Education, are focused on the need for change and on ways to begin and carry out restructuring. We expect this vision statement to continue to change and evolve in future editions as the participants in the strategic options network clarify and share their own school vision and beliefs.

The development team for these statements included: Bob Bartalot, Paul Czaja, Nancy Hall, Faith Hamre, Marc Hankin, Jim Hennes, Ginny Hennes, Gene Howard, Joy Jensen, Arnie Langberg, Dagnija Langberg, Ed Larsh, Jane Larsh, Linda Lindsay, Michael Reynolds, Richard Stenson, Vicente Serrano, Mary Ellen Sweeney, Jerry Villars and Doreen White. The stages of school evolution were adapted from earlier work at McREL by Shirley McCune and Ed Larsh, revised by Jerry Villars. The learner goals were adapted from a paper by Cleve Penberthy, Telluride School District. The learning principles were adapted from works by Art Combs, Leslie Hart and Goodwin Watson.

For further information on the strategic options initiative, contact any of the steering committee or the address below.

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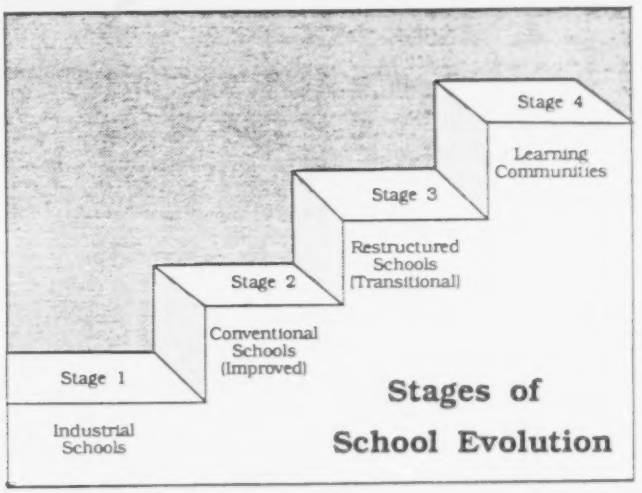
April, 1990

I. STAGES OF SCHOOLING EVOLUTION

The concept of restructuring education can be seen as part of an evolution of schooling from the 20th century industrial school to the 21st century learning community.



Stage 1 - Industrial Schools: An assembly line approach characterized by screening of students, age-graded group-based instruction, repetitive paper-pencil seatwork, fragmentation of learning time, top-down decision making and staff isolation.

Stage 2 - Conventional Schools (Improved): Similar characteristics to the industrial model school, but with significant steps taken to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Improvements focus on effective schools strategies such as instructional techniques and classroom management, and on reform measures such as curricular requirements, lengthening the day and programs to fix crisis areas.

Stage 3 - Restructured Schools (Transitional): Premises of the earlier models are challenged and systemic efforts are made to redesign schooling by reallocating and reordering resources available from the conventional school structure. Basic roles and functions are reexamined and school restructured consistent with the visions of these roles, student needs and learning principles.

Stage 4 - Learning Communities: In a learning society, the total community works to meet the learning needs of all citizens throughout each person's life. The school becomes one of many centers of learning. The collaboration of school and a diversity of other institutions, settings and options produces a new synergy in learning opportunities and community commitment. Schooling serves cross-generational needs as a developer of human beings.

Strategic Options Initiative
Denver, Colorado
March, 1990

II. ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

ESSENTIAL RESTRUCTURING COMPONENTS FOR TRANSFORMING THE SCHOOLS OF TODAY INTO THE LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF TOMORROW

The Colorado Strategic Options Initiative promotes the restructuring and redesign of education to enable all schools and communities to meet the needs of all students and citizens in the future. A variety of changes in schooling are needed which must go beyond conventional improvement practices. Our schools must be developmentally appropriate for the student and operationally consistent with our vision.

Tactical decisions are concerned with relatively short-term activities necessary for maintaining the organization and, at times, for partially moving the educational process in the desired direction. Tactical decisions focus on improving present practices and being effective in what we currently do. Tactical decisions can get a school started toward change, if they are consistent with the strategic vision, but they cannot produce a restructured school.

Strategic decisions deal with the total context of schooling. They are concerned with the nature and structure of the educational process and with the means whereby this process can be substantially modified. Strategic change or restructuring challenges the status quo and involves qualitative changes. Such decisions focus on the psychological and philosophical bases of education, the educational environment, what is to be learned, and how learning is to be nourished.

What we are saying is that doing better what we conventionally do cannot address the needs of most students. Nor can it produce schools which offer the learning opportunities needed for our students in tomorrow's world. What we know about learning, about the future, about our multicultural society and about current school problems calls for major change and substantial restructuring of our schools and of the total learning environments in our communities.

The following represent a number of interrelated **strategic** components essential to restructured schooling and learning communities. These components have been identified from futures literature and the research on learning and quality education.

1. **School-Centered Decision Making and Accountability**

   Rationale: The power to make decisions should reside with those most affected by those decisions.

   Description: Schools will become the centers of decision making and renewal. Educators and the community, who are held accountable for the performance of students, will also hold the power necessary to accomplish their task. This will include control over such critical variables as budget and personnel. Time to create and sustain a transformed school must be found. School-centered decision making will require a new, supportive role for the conventional central office structure and a new level of partnership for school and community.

2. **Personal Sense of Belonging**

Rationale: The most effective learning environments are those in which both teachers and students can feel a sense of belonging and empowerment. The work group is small enough that frequent, direct and honest communication is possible among all of its members.

Description: Collegial teams of teachers, support staff and students work as an integrated unit within a family-like organization. Guidance is integrated into the program, enabling the adults to be involved in the development of the whole child. Every student is treated as special, given personal attention and prevented from "disconnecting" or drifting through school anonymously.

3. **Flexible Use of Time and Space**

Rationale: Regarding human learning, high quality of performance must be the constant, while time to reach peak performance must be the variable.

Description: Schooling should provide sufficient flexibility of scheduling, student learning time and performance options to enable every student to acquire those essential skills and body of knowledge requisite to the development of full potential.

Flexibility of time implies a continuous progress approach in which essential learnings are clearly stated and time is scheduled to fit the nature of the task and the needs of each learner. Flexibility of space implies that variable spaces and settings are provided which also relate to the nature of the task and activity to be engaged.

4. **Integrated Core Curriculum: Common Outcomes–Diverse Paths**

Rationale: Every young person must be provided the opportunity and the necessary support to meet fully her/his responsibilities as a citizen in the emerging twenty-first century.

Description: The curriculum should be so personalized as to respond to each student's unique talents and capabilities. At the same time, it should stress, both in its process and content, a common core of interdisciplinary skills and understanding enabling every student to grasp fundamental relationships, to link disparate bodies of knowledge and to make useful decisions based upon these skills and understanding. Comprehensiveness is an essential component of a learning community. Intellectual focus is an essential component of the school.

Every student should have a personalized learning plan clearly identifying major areas of personal, social and intellectual development. A portfolio of accomplishments in these areas should be maintained by each student to reflect growth toward personal potential. Evaluation of any outcome should include more than one means of assessment.

5. **Changed Roles**

Rationale: Any authentic act of learning is essentially an active role for the student as well as the teacher.

Description: For students to function well within a learning community, their role must move away from passivity to an ever increasing active responsibility to acquire and use knowledge. This change in the student's approach to learning requires the teacher to move away from the customary role of being a dispenser of knowledge and to take on the role of being a learner and a facilitator of learning.

Strategic Options Initiative
Denver, Colorado
March, 1990

III. SHARED BELIEFS

Colorado Strategic Options Initiative

1. Every person is capable of learning, of fulfilling educational goals, and of the self-directed learning required for continuing educational growth.

2. If our schools are to be significantly better, they must be significantly different. Schools must become self-renewing organizations that can learn from experience and change to meet the needs of the present and the future.

3. The restructured school is a stage in the transition to the preferred future of a learning community or learning society.

4. Knowledge and resources are available on how to redesign schooling environments and how to effect a climate for learning which assures success for every student and greater satisfaction and professional growth for every teacher.

5. Educational change takes time and requires the commitment and involvement of many parties: teachers, parents, students, school staff, administration and community.

6. Restructuring means moving beyond maintenance of systems and tactical school improvement to strategic and fundamental change as a continuous process. Tinkering to improve effectiveness within conventional schooling is not restructuring.

7. Restructuring is driven by strategic planning concepts of vision, involvement (collaboration), planning, action and reflection. Restructuring occurs in a spiral model of planning, staff development and change recycling over time.

8. The educational change process, and the vision which drive it, is based on experience, values and knowledge of human growth and development, learning, teaching and future demands.

9. Restructuring is systemic: strategic change and redesign requires addressing all elements of the learning environment-purposes, psychological environment, students, strategies, stuff, staff, space and time.

10. Restructuring is synergistic: not only does developing one strategic component lead to dealing with other components, but the change produced by addressing several components is a major restructuring greater than that produced by isolated options and improvement efforts.

Strategic Options Initiative
Denver, Colorado
March, 1990

IV. VISION

A BEGINNING VISION FOR SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES OF EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A. CONTEXT

A vision is not static. It changes over time because the environment changes, opportunities change and needs and wants change. A vision is a conceptual image of a dynamic future--one that portrays processes, principles, relationships and a sense of change over time.

The vision described herein provides the basis for dialogue and discussion among the stakeholders of a school system. Our emphasis is on a participative process within each school community.

The vision of a learning environment for the 21st century requires a paradigm shift, an understanding that we need to develop new structures, and non-structures, which meet the intrinsic neurological development and psychological principles of learning of every child. For example, we know the brain does not work in linear, ordered steps, but operates in leaps and down simultaneous paths. The vision presented here is not limited to a description of a school, but rather focuses on knowledge of both the learning process and setting. In this vision, everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner, with each interconnecting with each other within their social context.

The context of this vision includes the changing demographics of our communities and our student population, both in Colorado and throughout the county. Our student enrollment increasingly will be from minority cultures. More students are entering school from poverty households. The majority of students will come from homes with single parents or with both parents in the work force. There is growing disparity between wages of those with more and less education. And, of course, there are the familiar predictions of shifts in the kinds of jobs available in the future, toward an information-technological society, and the number of career changes our students can expect to go through in their lifetime.

The context of this vision also views future schooling from an ecological perspective, thereby inviting a positive synergy of effects as well as encouraging the ending of that fragmentation presently limiting our learning communities. Every element in the learning community is affected by every other, and none can escape the consequences of the future.

B. ASSUMPTIONS

The following beliefs and assumptions are part of the context of this vision statement.

1. Every person is capable of learning, of fulfilling educational goals, and of the self-directed learning required for continuing educational growth.

2. Each child is unique and the child's nature is to seek development to his or her own full potential.

3. The child's total environment--home, school and community--is the learning environment and is experienced by the child as a whole.

4. The student and the adult are understood by the knowing and respecting of their unique personal, family, cultural and social systems. Respect for the child reflects a knowledge of the child's growth and development, his/her emerging and unique neurological strengths, and what the child (and adult) bring to any situation from their own systems.

5. We seek some degree of agreement on an education vision, a preferred future. Our individual conceptions of an education vision will be impacted and changed by the group working on the vision.

6. Learning occurs best and schools work best when the student, parent and teacher choose to be there.

7. Change is constant. Our visions will change over time.

8. Genuine and substantive movement toward this vision can only occur when all the education constituencies (state level, district level, school level and community) honor these assumptions and validate them through policy and practice.

C. LEARNING PRINCIPLES

What is known about human learning, about human growth and development, which might guide our efforts to redesign our schools and their processes and procedures?

1. Learning is deeply personal. We learn only in relation to what we already know including what we bring to school. We learn (are affected) to the degree to which we discover the personal meaning of information to the self. We must find personal meaning to engage in critical thinking.

2. Learning is enabled when linked to useful outcomes and to active and real rather than abstract situations.

3. We learn best when we have a need to know. We learn what is appropriate to our purposes.

4. The best time to learn anything is when whatever is to be learned is immediately useful to us.

5. We learn best that which we, ourselves, participate in selecting and planning. Genuine participation intensifies motivation, flexibility and rate of learning.

6. Learning is governed by the experience of challenge or threat. We learn when we are challenged, interested and believe we can learn and when there is freedom from discouragement, the expectation of failure, or threat.

7. Learning, as does all behavior, involves self-concept. What we believe about ourselves affects our behavior, and what a student learns about self may be far more important than what he/she learns about subject matter.

8. Effective learning requires feedback. To be truly helpful, feedback should be immediate, personal rather than comparative and related directly to performance. It should point the way to next steps.

9. Feelings of being cared for and belonging have vital effects upon learning. People who feel they are cared for and belong are likely to be excited, motivated and want to get involved. People who feel alienated are likely to be turned off, apathetic and seek to escape.

10. An accepting, nonauthoritarian atmosphere is conducive to learner initiative and creativity, encouraging the learning of attitudes of self-confidence, originality, enterprise and independence.

D. LEARNER GOALS

The goals/visions for learners described here are hopeful. They serve, as lighthouses along a stormy coast, to give us our bearings, to call us forward, to elevate our expectations for success. A major purpose of school is to have all students achieve at levels essential to our present and near-future society. Another major purpose of the education system is to foster self-directedness and responsibility and to prepare students to continue to learn effectively when they become adults. Finally, core values the school seeks to transmit include: democratic values (self-government), human rights (respect and caring) and optimism (the world can become a better place, and effort by the student will lead to achievement). Our goals, therefore, are to seek the development in each individual of the following:

1. Worthy intellectual and creative processes, essential communication skills, capacity in inquiry, analysis and problem-solving, and the development of self directiveness and a reflective and examining nature.

2. A moral and humane character and philosophy, accompanied by the ability to exercise moral and ethical judgments and to establish moral and ethical standards by which to guide one's life.

3. Mental and physical health.

4. A sense of self-realization which includes a sense of dignity, self-worth, artistry and grace.

5. Competence and sensitivity in human and social relations.

6. The ability and the desire to exercise responsible citizenship, requiring, among other things, a sense of history and an understanding and appreciation of our multicultural heritage.

7. Economic and occupational competence.

E. INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING

Education is having experiences, reflecting on those experiences and creating knowledge, learning and cognitive structures from that process. Thinking critically is intelligence acting on experience and deciding what to believe or do. We believe that every person is capable of high performance and has an unlimited potential for learning.

1. Students differ from one another, come from different backgrounds and cultures, and have different learning styles, levels of maturity, levels of motivation, goals and values. Therefore, students should not be expected to master the same material in the say way and within the same time period. Individual learning plans are developed for each student.

2. Those in the learning system must continuously be aware of limitations being imposed and instead be sure that high expectations are fostered. The school accepts the obligation to see that students do achieve.

3. Roles must change. The teacher becomes coach, facilitator and broker of community resources. The student learns from the total learning environment, which includes other students, the school, the adult and the community.

4. Learning is personalized and holistic. The child is observed, needs and readiness identified by the teacher, parent and student and the teacher (and parent/community) make available appropriate experiences and settings. The student is part of creating the learning experiences for him/herself. In such an environment, one might find:

a. Cooperative team learning;
b. Active, experiential learning, and use of manipulative material;
c. Learning activities linked to actual, productive uses (useful in the eyes of the student);
d. Variation in teaching styles consistent with learning styles and content, respecting cultural, racial, ethnic and language diversity;
e. Peer tutoring, individual, small and large group learning and mixed age groupings;
f. Performance-based learning practices including: clear expectations, continuous progress practices where time is variable while competence is constant, and means are variable/individualized.

5. In the future schooling, evaluation is to improve more than to prove. Evaluation is performance based, on-going, holistic and both formal and informal. Evaluation serves:

a. For the student's own use in guiding learning and planning;
b. For use of staff, parents and other participants in constructing the learning environment; and
c. For public accountability.

F. CURRICULUM AND PROGRAM

The learning environment is designed and managed to aid in attainment of the learner goals. The curriculum allows for diversity in students and faculty without lowering expectations or denying opportunity. Cultural diversity is used as a strength. The adult's role is to remove obstacles from the path of the student that might hinder the student's development, and to prepare an environment or opportunities that support the student's learning and development.

1. The school works from theory. Principles are the basis for teaching decisions.

2. The learning environment offers a wide and large array of stimuli, information, experiences, etc. It provides the input used by the brain to develop patterns and structures.

3. There is a simplified core of essential learning (less is more).

4. Knowledge, by nature, is unified and inter-related. Our curriculum should reflect that relatedness, emphasizing concept-centered, problem-centered interdisciplinary approaches.

5. There is an emphasis on teaching for national, international and multicultural understanding and communications. Even within our own country, we seek to appreciate and value our differences as assets.

6. The curriculum fosters the ability and the desire of the student to learn (life-long learning). This includes such ideas as:

a. How to acquire information;
b. Skill in developing frameworks on which to hang new learning;
c. Thinking skills to process information;
d. An internal locus of control (attribution to self) and having a vision of oneself thinking and learning in the future; and
e. The ability to apply learning.

G. STRUCTURE, ORGANIZATION AND FACILITIES

The structure and governance of the school and other learning environments are designed to take account of best use, in terms of students and staff, of strategies, stuff, space and time. Site-based decision making and school self-renewal are goals. The school validates its operation against its educational vision.

1. The school is organized so that each student has the time necessary to demonstrate his or her ability to learn, as described above, in a variety of ways and a variety of areas.

2. Basic organizational structure for learning ranges from individualized to multi-age groups. Size and composition of group will vary according to purpose and outcomes. Students and teachers remain together over time to increase personalization.

3. The basic organizational structure for the faculty is collegial, with interdisciplinary teaching teams working with multi-age/grade groups of students using volunteers, aides, interns and student leaders to assist with instruction.

4. Staff and pupils will determine the flexible use of time for year-long learning, avoiding isolated blocks of time.

5. Educational roles and responsibilities of the entire community will be redefined according to the educational needs of an informational and changing society. The learning community is collaborative and collegial.

6. Physical facilities will have flexible space, be aesthetically stimulating and open to all citizens. Design of the space will be determined by the primary users.

7. All physical facilities, including equipment, materials and space, will be available for use by all teachers, students and other members of the learning community.

8. The local and global community, including businesses, governmental agencies and cultural institutions, will be an essential setting for learning.

H. EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Evaluation serves at least three purposes: (l) for the use of the student in guiding his or her own learning; (2) for the use of staff and others in preparing and improving the learning situation; and (3) for school and public accountability. Consistent with the goal of self-directed learning, evaluation begins with the student's own self-evaluation.

1. Evaluation will address larger goals and competencies, such as the ability to work in a collaborative group, critical thinking, persistence, the ability to plan and manage one's own learning, etc.

2. Evaluation of any feature will include more than one means of assessment.

3. While evaluations and reports to parents are individualized, tailored as appropriate to the language and culture of the home, the school also will provide collective information which satisfies legitimate questions of school and system quality.

NOTE: The learner goals were adapted from a paper by Cleve Penberthy, Telluride School District. The learning principles were adapted from works by Art Combs, Leslie Hart and Goodwin Watson.

Strategic Options Initiative
Denver, Colorado
March, 1990

V. BACKGROUND ON THE COLORADO STRATEGIC OPTIONS INITIATIVE

The Strategic Options Initiative in Colorado is a grass roots, self-help effort to encourage and support the restructuring of education and the redesign of schools. The initiative seeks to help schools move beyond tactical or procedural reforms to substantive, strategic restructuring of the way they operate and the way the school relates to the larger community.

New environments for learning are essential if our youth are to possess the flexibility, adaptiveness and self-directedness to cope effectively with the continuing changes confronting them in the years ahead.

The initiative planners believe that most of our schools need to be redesigned to provide an appropriate education for the future. The purposes of the Strategic Options conferences include having school district personnel, students and people from other youth-serving agencies share ideas and strategies to meet the learning needs of all youth, including those who are at-risk and disconnected from their schools.

In 1986-87, Ed and Jane Larsh, Larsh Associates, pulled together the core of interest from Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and Colorado Options in Education, the alternative school organization in Colorado, to plan ways to support schools in strategic change. A forum was held May, 1987 in Denver entitled, Strategic Options for Reconnecting Youth. The options were those core strategic (as opposed to tactical) components identified by research as essential for restructuring and redesigning education.

A cadre of persons from various school and consultant backgrounds was developed by Arnie Langberg, Denver Public Schools, to assist schools at the forum and to provide follow-up during the year when feasible. Training sessions have been held for these technical assistants or change agents.

In 1987-88 the steering committee identified three goals. First, to assist those schools already implementing strategic options. Second, to build a diverse coalition of individuals committed to a serious restructuring of education, a coalition to develop a shared vision for the future of education in Colorado. Third, to continue the Strategic Options conferences.

A second forum, Strategic Options II was held April 1988, in Breckenridge, Colorado, hosted by the Summit School District. Approximately 190 persons and 27 teams attended. The forum was designed to assist both those who had attended the first year and those new to strategic redesign concepts. The forum presented a review of the research literature and took most participants through a school redesign activity.

In 1988-89, the initiative focused on three activities: developing the guidebook **Restructuring Education;** holding a workshop for technical assistants and change agents; and, conducting a third conference, Strategic Options III: A Self-Directed Strategic Planning Institute for School-Based Teams. The conference was held in July, 1989, at Snowmass, Colorado, hosted by Colorado Mountain College. The conference was attended by more than 240 persons representing 46 school and district teams.

In 1989-90, a fourth forum is scheduled for July 23-25, 1990, again at Snowmass. The steering committee has developed a vision and beliefs statement of education for the 21st century, and another change facilitator workshop was held. A newsletter, Catalyst, has been started in collaboration with CDE, the Governor's Creativity Schools initiative, and others. Mary Ellen Sweeney is editor. A good number of schools, districts and even communities have made significant progress in strategic planning and redesign. For information on the Strategic Options Initiative, contact Ed Larsh, Carbondale, 963-9221, or Jim Hennes, CDE, 866-6842.

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